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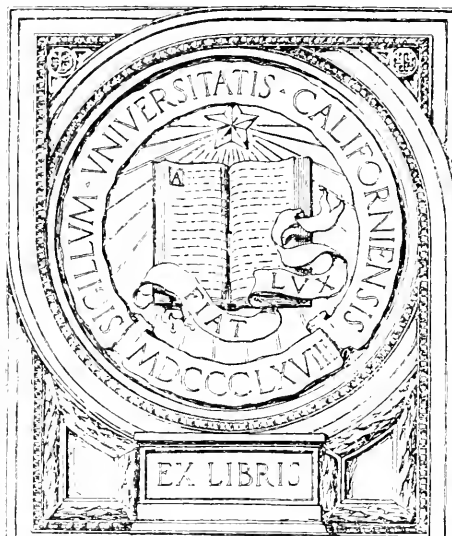
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# The Library Assistants' Association :

An Outline of its  
Development and Work.

By  
WM. BENSON THORNE  
(President, 1906-1909).

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# The Library Assistants' Association :

An Outline of its Development and Work.

By Wm. Benson Thorne.

The foundation of the L.A.A. was the natural outcome of the development of the Public Library movement in London and the Provinces. In 1893 the Library Association commenced a series of "Summer Schools" which consisted of visits to libraries of note in and around London, as well as to various commercial houses such as Messrs. Cassell & Co., the publishers; Sir Chas. Reed & Sons, the type founders, where information of value to the librarian could be gathered; lectures were also included and the arrangements were open without fee to all assistants engaged in libraries. The "School" lasted a week and concluded with a prize-giving for the best essay on some part of the week's proceedings. The School attracted assistants from all parts of London, and not a few from the Provinces; several of them met each year, friendships were made, and so the idea for an association for assistants evolved. In 1895 the idea fructified, and largely as a result of the individual efforts of Mr. R. A. Peddie (then of the Gladstone Library, National Liberal Club) and Mr. W. W. Fortune (at that time of the Lewisham Public Library) the L.A.A. was founded. The first General Meeting was held at 20 Hanover Square, W., on July 17th, 1895, and in the following winter meetings were held regularly and many excellent papers were read. The first "Rules" of the Association provided for the election of Chairman, Hon. Treasurer, Hon. Secretary, and a Committee of ten to be elected annually. Members were either Senior, who paid a subscription of 5/- per annum, or Junior, who paid an annual subscription of 2/6; honorary members were also allowed. Subsequently the Committee was increased to twenty members, half of whom were to be non-London representatives. The original Officers and Committee were as follows:—

Chairman : R. A. Peddie.

Treasurer : E. H. Caddie.

Secretary : W. W. Fortune.



Committee: H. O. Bursill, H. G. T. Cannons, A. H. Carter, W. G. Chambers, S. J. Clarke, E. E. England, B. M. Headicar, A. Nash, F. J. Peplow, E. Quinn, and W. Vellenoweth.

Although viewed with suspicion in some quarters, and even meeting with active opposition here and there, the young Association received much encouragement from a number of the leading men in the profession. The late Dr. Richard Garnett, the late Frank Campbell, Mr. J. Y. W. MacAlister, Mr. J. D. Brown, Mr. C. T. Davis, Mr. Herbert Jones, Mr. Frank Pacy, Mr. H. D. Roberts, Mr. Chas. Welch and Miss M. S. R. James are some of those who by sympathetic assistance in a variety of ways enabled the new organization to find its footing. The first Annual Report is signed by R. A. Peddie, Chairman, and F. Meaden Roberts, Hon. Secretary; the number of members returned was fifty-four, with five Hon. Members in addition. A collection of books bearing upon all phases of library history and administration was reported as in course of formation, a number of gifts being mentioned; and already the need for classes in library subjects, whereby assistants might be enabled to qualify for the Library Association Professional Examination as then constituted, was emphasized with the hope that some scheme might be brought into existence by the Committee. This latter, however, under the rule of the L.A.A. has never materialized, but there is little doubt that the persistent airing of the need for professional lectures and classes by the succeeding Committees did much to hasten the action of the Library Association in that direction, with the result that a reasonably satisfactory system of professional education has gradually been evolved by that body. That the educational efforts of the older Association met with considerable criticism at almost every point from those for whom the efforts were made cannot be denied; but it is also true that the satisfactoriness of the present system owes not a little to that self-same criticism which, in the main, has proved to have been quite justified. During the years 1898-1902 this subject occurs continually in the professional periodicals: the question of the "open-door" (i.e., the admission to lectures of persons not engaged in library work) was productive of numerous discussions and much correspondence. The style of lectures provided, the subjects selected, the qualifications of the lecturers, etc., in turn came under comment publicly, either in the professional press or at the ordinary professional

meetings, and this keen interest in a matter of vital importance to the assistant librarian was due almost entirely to the activity of the L.A.A.

The voicing of the educational needs of the assistant was a powerful factor in leading the Committee to consider the possibilities of an independent publication which should be the official channel of information concerning the doings of the Association. At the monthly meeting held in May 1897, the subject was fully discussed, and the following resolution carried:—"That the Committee be requested to formulate and lay before the Association at an early date a scheme for the publication of a journal." With a total membership of only 74, the principal difficulty the Committee had to face was naturally one of finance, but with the aid of several donations given for the purpose, "The Library Assistant" was successfully launched on January 1st, 1898, and has been issued regularly every month since. For so small a Society this was a big undertaking, but it was a step in the right direction, for the Committee now had something tangible to offer the members as well as a valuable vehicle for ventilating all matters on which some pronouncement of policy was desirable. The first issues of "The Library Assistant" consisted of 12 pages and were ably edited by the late Bertram L. Dyer, then of the Kensington Public Libraries. Promptitude in publication was always aimed at and the journal rapidly acquired a recognized place for itself in the list of professional periodicals. The subscription price to non-members was fixed at 3/- per annum post free, and it was not long ere copies were being mailed to all quarters of the globe. After a few months' publication an allegorical cover was used, the design for the purpose having been cleverly carried out by Mr. Herbert Jones. So scarce have copies of the first volume become that on more than one occasion as much as a guinea has been paid for it by libraries wishing to possess a complete set.

For the next few years the Association pursued a fairly even way: the membership increased although not with the rapidity which had been hoped for or even expected. A somewhat fluctuating membership roll is almost inevitable: individuals not only leave the profession but are also promoted to chief-ships and so automatically drop out of the ranks, while occasionally others lose interest and withdraw. The Executive of the Association has always been particularly liable to the disadvantage of having its

best men suddenly compelled to relinquish office owing to their appointment to superior offices in the profession, the same ability which gave them office having secured their call to the higher ranks. The present chief librarians of Ipswich, Exeter, Wallasey, Finsbury, Bromley (Kent), Ilford, Deptford, London School of Economics, Cardiff, Gravesend, Kendal, Walthamstow, Norwich, Royal Colonial Institute, Handsworth and Wood Green are amongst those who have at some period served either as officers or committee-men, whilst many others are holding important secondary posts up and down the country. Meetings of the Association continued monthly each year from October to June, and a large number of country excursions to places of interest were also arranged. Usually efforts were made on these occasions to include the inspection of a library, and amongst the places visited may be mentioned Twickenham, Brighton, Stratford-on-Avon, and the Claydon Villages in Buckinghamshire.

Although the Association never at any time organized technical lectures, yet schemes for advancing the technical knowledge of its members have frequently been carried out. For a few years, commencing in November 1900, a Study Circle was conducted by a special sub-committee: readings in certain textbooks were planned, questions were set, model answers eventually provided and prizes awarded to the students producing the best work. At another time a "Proficiency Test" was organized whereby an assistant might ascertain the degree of proficiency he had attained in each of the divisions of the Library Association Professional Examination Syllabus. The papers sent to the Committee in connection with this scheme were adjudicated by the leading librarians of the country, who willingly gave their services for the purpose. A Reading Circle with library law for its subject which flourished for a season, and the circularization of "Ever Circulators" are other phases of the desire to promote general professional culture which has always characterized the Executive.

The late Thomas Greenwood was ever a staunch friend to the Association; in the second year of its existence he generously presented every member with a copy of his book "Public Libraries," which, although superseded now, was then almost the only volume available on practical library administration. At a later date every member was given a copy of his "Library Year-Book," and in 1905 he presented 50 copies of his admirable "Life of Edward Edwards" to the Committee to dispose of amongst the members as



gifts from himself. Twelve months before this he had, however, signalized his interest in the work of the Association by placing in the hands of the Executive the magnificent sum of £20 to be awarded in prizes for the best essays on subjects to be set by it: the competition to be open to all library assistants in the Kingdom. Four subjects were announced: two for seniors and two for juniors, the prizes being as follows:—

- Senior :   Two first of £4 each.  
              Two second of £2 each.
- Junior :   Two first of £2 10s. each.  
              Two second of £1 10s. each.

The essays received were neither numerous nor of a very high standard, but the literature of librarianship at that time was not extensive, technical training did not occupy the prominent position it holds to-day, essay competitions in some respects were a novelty; and so, taking all these and other things into consideration, the essays produced were as brilliant a reflection of the period as could probably be expected. Another benefactor to the Association was the late Mr. Alfred Cotgreave, who pursued the same methods as Mr. Greenwood; on different occasions he presented to the members copies of his "Guillemet Library Encyclopædic Catalogue," the extremely useful "Contents-Subject Index" and the interesting "Views and Memoranda of Public Libraries." Beyond these gifts he provided money prizes for essays during several years and always lavishly entertained the Association whenever his frequent invitation to hold meetings at West Ham Central Library could be accepted. The Association owes a great deal to Mr. Cotgreave; his timely generosity strengthening the hands of the Committee in more than one way. In this connection, too, Mr. J. Y. W. MacAlister must be mentioned; in the early days of its history the Association would have found existence considerably harder even than it did without the aid he so generously bestowed. A firm believer in individual effort, a vigorous "fighter," he readily sympathised with the objects of the Association and rendered continuous assistance by allowing meetings at 20, Hanover Square; by presenting books to the newly-formed library and by giving liberal amounts for prizes in connection with the education schemes organized by the Committee. When Mr. MacAlister resigned the Hon. Secretaryship of the Library Association, the junior body took the opportunity of

endeavouring to show its appreciation of all he had done by making a small presentation to him, although fully conscious that Mr. MacAlister could never worthily be repaid for his share in promoting the success of the Assistants' Association.

The formation of Branch bodies in the Provinces had always been a development expected of the Association, and in March 1899, the first—the North-West Branch—was constituted. The area, with Manchester for a centre, was in every respect favourable to the purpose, and much good work was done. The Association, however, was young; lack of experience, and perhaps a want of flexibility and diplomacy on both sides gave rise to events which culminated in the dissolution of the Branch after four years of existence. The present-day Council, entirely different in policy and with a revised constitution, would do much to erase the memory of these mistakes, because at this time, when unity amongst assistants is more than ever desirable, this memory is a strong factor in keeping the North-Western assistant librarians segregated in two small and independent societies, which, however excellent, cannot do much for the profession unless linked up with the national organization. The Liverpool and District Association and the Manchester Fellowship are the only two societies of assistant librarians working independently, and they and the L.A.A. would gain much by union. For a period after the demise of this Branch the missionary spirit was in abeyance, although considerable intermittent private correspondence between individuals was carried on, Mr. Geo. E. Roebuck, at that time Hon. Secretary, working hard in this way; but changes in the *personnel* of the Committee and praiseworthy enthusiasm chiefly on the part of Mr. W. C. Berwick Sayers brought about the establishment of a healthy Yorkshire Branch in December 1906, an Irish Branch in June 1907, South Wales and North-Eastern Branches in March and April 1908 respectively, and the latest—the Midland Branch—constituted in February 1910. These Branches formulate their own rules and are entirely self-governing, the only condition the parent body requires being that neither rules nor actions shall conflict with those of the Association generally. Branches elect their own members, committees and officers, and arrange their own meetings; at the same time each individual is a member of the L.A.A. and each receives a copy of "The Library Assistant" as published. In return for the journals supplied, the parent

body receives from the Branches a proportion of the subscriptions received, the amount being just sufficient to cover actual cost and postage, the balance being retained by the Branch for its maintenance. Here a word may be said on the finances of the Association. It has never had large balance sheets, for the adequate reason that it has preferred the very minimum subscription by which its work could be carried on, rather than one which would produce a sound safety margin. Hence no assistant librarian has been required to pay more than 5s. yearly, while the younger assistants pay 2s. 6d. It is demonstrable that associates (junior members) represent no great financial gain to the Association; but it is felt that it is better to work under these conditions rather than, by a larger subscription, to place the Association beyond the means of the most poorly paid junior assistant. Fortunately the Association has had the advantage of the long and devoted services of a most acute and statesmanlike Treasurer, Mr. W. Geo. Chambers, who has brought the Association creditably through many a crisis. In this way the work goes forward amicably and the Association has become the largest British society representing librarianship in existence, whilst there is every prospect of new Branches coming into being. The fact that the Library Association, after painful experience of other modes, has remodelled its bye-laws relating to Branches on lines which very definitely follow those adopted by the L.A.A., is sufficient evidence of the organizing wisdom of the younger Association. A feature of the new era in Branch establishment has been the visits of officers from the parent body to special meetings arranged in the various provincial centres; the President of the Association or General Hon. Secretary have in this way visited and addressed meetings of each of the Branches, except the Irish, and the success which has attended this new policy has been exceptional. Enthusiasm of a lasting kind has been engendered, difficulties have been met and overcome in a mutually satisfactory way, friendships have been made, the spirit of fellowship has received a wonderful impetus, and the sum total of good accomplished is incalculable. Most of the credit for this belongs to Mr. W. C. Berwick Sayers: his enthusiasm, experience, tact, facility in public speaking, perseverance, and not least, self-sacrifice, in journeying up and down the country at his own expense, have resulted in a state of affairs upon which the Association may heartily congratulate itself, and for which it owes a

considerable debt of gratitude to him. In the formation of Branches lies the hope of the Association for increased prosperity: members in isolated positions "lose touch" to some extent and unless their own enthusiasm is sufficient to compel a maintenance of interest, indifference occurs and not infrequently membership is allowed to lapse. This is scarcely to be wondered at, for a person needs to be unusually enthusiastic to be content to forward a subscription every twelve months to an unknown entity miles away, receiving in return simply a small magazine once a month. The man with a hearty belief in his work, of course, is grateful even for this small opportunity for learning what is going on in the world of librarianship in other places, but others seem to require more, and the formation of a local Branch provides the necessary means for supplying it.

The geographical difficulty is naturally not a slight one, but no reason appears why, under the auspices of the Association, members employed in a few libraries situated close together should not be linked into little fellowships, where the more formal organization of a fully constituted Branch is impossible. These fellowships could meet whenever convenient, and at least exchange ideas or discuss library matters if no set papers were read, thus keeping alive a definite interest in professional affairs and yet supporting the Association in its work of furthering the cause of assistants generally.

In 1906 an invitation was received from the Library Association to become affiliated to that body, but after a lengthy discussion of all the pros and cons of the case, the members generally by a plebiscite finally decided that the L.A.A. could do better work as an independent organization, and so the invitation was declined. This may have been a bold step, but at least it left the younger Association free to act without consultation with, or reference to, the senior body in any question, and this was undoubtedly an advantage when the question of registration for proficient librarians began to be discussed widely in 1907. The subject was one of immense concern to the L.A.A. The general opinion was that a register of some kind was becoming a necessity, and the energy displayed by the L.A.A. in debating the question, gaining views and determining the lines of a scheme which should deal justly with its own members, whilst not detracting from the dignity of the profession or seeking to establish a low standard, did not a little in

prevailing upon the Library Association eventually to adopt a scheme which, although not altogether in accord with the ideas of the L.A.A., was certainly a means whereby the trained competent librarian could secure official recognition by the principal professional Association. This was a great thing to have secured, and the claim of the L.A.A. to "have made registration a practical question" is literally true.

The foundation of four Branches and the increase in membership resulting therefrom, led to the adoption of a new constitution for the Association in June 1908. The new constitution abolished the office of Chairman in favour of a President, and substituted a Council of 22 in place of the Committee of 20; it also changed the classification of members into Hon. Fellows, Fellows, Members, and Associates, thus creating a new class—Fellows—which should consist of persons holding the position of Chief Librarian, but hitherto Members or Associates of the Association. Further, all classes of members, including Hon. Fellows, were given equal voting powers. The increase of seats from 20 to 22 on the Council was to allow for the election of two representatives from the newly-formed class of "Fellows," and by a later revision of the rules a Vice-President, who must be a Provincial member, may be elected, whilst secretaries of all Branches are elected to the General Council *ex officio* in order that they may keep in touch with all the proceedings of the Association.

Some idea has now been given of the manner in which the L.A.A. has grown from a society of 54 members as recorded in the first Annual Report, to one of nearly ten times that number at the present day; the first issue of the official journal consisted of 12 pages with a circulation of somewhere about 200: to-day it consists of 20 pages, with 8 pages of advertisements, and a circulation of over 700 copies. At no other time has the Association achieved such a high state of efficiency as it now enjoys, and its work has been cordially recognized by leading men of the day in all departments of life. Nothing has been said of the excellent series of winter programmes which have been arranged and successfully carried out during the past five or six years; space does not permit for a full enumeration of them all, but this brief record could not be complete were no mention made of some of the prominent men who have honoured the Association by giving addresses or by presiding over its meetings. Thus Sir Sidney Lee, Edmund Gosse, Israel Gollancz, T. J. MacNamara, the Hon. W.

Pember Reeves, F. G. Kenyon, Sir Henry A. Miers, and C. T. Hagberg Wright are amongst those who have delivered addresses during recent years; whilst Sir Albert Rollit, Sir Frank T. Marzials, the President of the Law Society, Coulson Kernahan, and many of the principal librarians of the day have officiated as Chairmen on various occasions. Privilege, too, has been readily granted for meetings to be held in the University of London, the Board of Education Offices, the South Kensington Art Library, the London Institution, the London Library, the Guildhall of the City of London, the Hall of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers, the London School of Economics, Sion College, and practically every public library in London where accommodation is possible has received the Association on at least one occasion.

Some of the papers read before the Association having deserved a more useful form than was afforded them as part of the ordinary volume of "The Library Assistant," a "L.A.A. Series of Reprints" has been commenced, four numbers having been issued, which will be added to from time to time as suitable opportunity occurs. The Council has recently published a return of hours, salaries, and educational facilities of workers in libraries throughout the Kingdom. An authoritative return of this kind has long been a desideratum. On the results of these investigations, which have been carried out systematically on a worthy scale, a scheme of standard hours for employment and salaries in relation to income has been constructed, not with a view to forcing it upon library authorities, but with the idea of supplying reliable information when required.

A word or two may be permitted, perhaps, as to the Council's methods of procedure in transacting the business of the Association. The Council meets monthly, except during July and August, the President acting as Chairman. Three permanent Committees exist, viz :—(1) The Finance and General Purposes Committee, whose work is obvious; (2) The Education Committee which arranges the monthly meetings, organizes the competitions which are a frequent feature, and deals generally with all matters having an educational bearing; and (3) The Publication Committee, which supervises the issue of the official journal and the "L.A.A. Series." Every member of the Council serves on one of these Committees. Other Committees are appointed as occasion arises for special purposes, and there



exists at the present time one for dealing with Registration questions, another (consisting of the whole Council) for the distribution of the Return of Hours and Salaries, a Library Committee to enquire into and report upon the Association's Library, and a Press Committee. This last performs an important function in ensuring that reports of all meetings and doings of the Association are issued to papers wherein it is desirable such activities should be recorded. An interesting experiment in a new direction was tried in 1911, consisting of an Easter School in Brussels, with a series of lectures and demonstrations at the Brussels Institute of Bibliography. The co-operation of the Institute authorities was secured and library workers from all parts of England and from Holland were present. The experiment proved successful and the idea may be extended: schools may be organized in a variety of centres at home and on the Continent which would have an extremely valuable educational influence, introducing the members to new scenes, familiarizing them with varying methods of library practice and promoting a desirable *entente cordiale* of an international character. An Easter School at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is a natural sequel to a school in Brussels and has been arranged for 1912, whilst a number of other possibilities readily suggest themselves.

So the work of the Association grows and progresses: what the future contains for it is hard to predict. The limits of its activity are still far away on the horizon, and with the reorganization of the public library service which, though slow in coming, must come eventually, the Association will probably assume a position which for importance and influence will far exceed the dreams of its founders. Without doubt it is the duty of every assistant worker in libraries to attach himself to the Association and to endeavour to take an active part in its proceedings: there will always be a minority who prefer to maintain their independence, as they deem it, but the man with ideas, determined that they shall be fruitful, knows the only way to ensure success is by associating himself with others similarly minded. The future, to a very large extent, lies in the hands of the assistant, and by combining with others he can get enthusiasm and inspiration which will enable him to accomplish something towards making that future wear a brighter aspect than it otherwise might do. Critics notwithstanding, librarianship has made remarkable advances since the birth of the Association. Spurred on by its efforts the Library

Association has offered an educational goal to which the assistant librarian may work, but the arousing of the assistant, the development of his professional conscience, the impetus to use the opportunities afforded—this has been the peculiar and successful work of the L.A.A. It has “quickened the pace” in matters professional; has evolved and is evolving a better, more interested type of assistant, and has had no small influence in creating a new and better race of chief librarians. The following is a list of those who have held office in the Association:—

**PRESIDENT:** Wm. Benson Thorne, 1908-9; W. C. Berwick Sayers, 1909 to date.

**CHAIRMAN:** R. A. Peddie, 1895-6; A. H. Carter, 1896-8; F. Meaden Roberts, June-Sept. 1898; Henry Ogle, Nov. 1898 to June 1899; Evan G. Rees, 1899-1904; W. Geo. Chambers, 1904-6; Wm. Benson Thorne, 1906-8, elected first President 1908.

**HON. TREASURER:** E. H. Caddie, 1895-7; W. Geo. Chambers, 1897 to date.

**HON. SECRETARY:** W. W. Fortune, June to Aug. 1895; F. Meaden Roberts, 1895-8; B. L. Dyer, 1898-1900; A. Denton, 1900; J. Wilson Brown, 1900-1901; Geo. Ed. Roebuck, 1901-6; W. C. Berwick Sayers, 1906-9; H. T. Coutts, 1909 to date.

**HON. EDITOR:** B. L. Dyer, 1898-1900; H. Ogle, 1900-1901; S. A. Hatcher, 1901; H. Tapley Soper, 1901-2; Wm. Benson Thorne, 1902-4; John Rivers, 1904-5; Hugh Smith, 1905-8; W. C. Berwick Sayers, 1908-9; H. Rutherford Purnell, 1909 to date.

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